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Swan, Charlie; Perepa, Prithvi

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Swan, C & Perepa, P 2019, 'Police awareness of autism and the impact on individuals who wander', *Good Autism Practice*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 70-76.

Police awareness of autism and the impact on individuals who wander

Charlie Swan and Prithvi Perepa, UK

Address for correspondence: charlieswancontact@yahoo.co.uk

Acknowledgements: I express my gratitude to the participants of this research who helped to form preliminary foundations around this under researched topic. Thank you for all of your support Dr. Prithvi Perepa, a truly hard working and inspirational soul.

Editorial comment:

This small-scale study was conducted by Charlie Swan as part of his BA (Hons) degree in Special Education. He interviewed four police officers about their knowledge of autism and how they might respond to finding an autistic person who had wandered off from their home or their carer. Like other studies which focus on professional groups who cover the entire population and who are not focused on specific groups, the opportunities for training are often limited in terms of time and topic. As was found in this study, their understanding of autism and how they might adjust their practice was very limited and largely based on their own personal experiences. All showed empathy and a willingness to support the person in the best way, but did not know how to do this. So, if they do not know the person has autism they may misinterpret their actions but knowing the person is autistic, may not necessarily be any more helpful unless they have knowledge of what is likely to help. There is a growing recognition of the need for autism knowledge within police forces and some forces have worked very hard to enhance this. Knowing how best this is achieved is the focus of another study.

Introduction

There are few research studies on the knowledge and understanding that the police have about autism, and few, if any, studies specifically on how

police respond to individuals who wander. Wandering is defined as leaving an area without the supervision or permission of a caregiver which may result in risk or harm (Rice *et al.*, 2016; Hall, 2013). Anderson *et al.* (2012) found that 62% of parents questioned felt that wandering off can influence the activities they are able to do beyond the home setting. A primary goal of most interventions for people with autism is to increase their level of independence and to reduce their dependence on caregivers (Bergstrom, Najdowski & Tarbox, 2012). Despite this goal, Taylor, Hughes, Richard, Hoch and Rodriquez Coello (2004) and Bergstrom *et al.* (2012) found that the lack of safety skills taught or understood by autistic individuals imposed a high risk of wandering off (from caregivers, family and friends) and possibly becoming lost or harmed.

There is an increasing focus on autism within the criminal justice system. Some literature explores the support given to individuals with autism as witnesses, victims and suspects of crime (Iland, 2014; Crane, Maras, Hawken, Mulcahy and Memon, 2016) but little research on what officers do when faced with a person who has wandered. Anderson *et al.* (2012) raise the safety implications of wandering and the need for knowledgeable and supportive professionals. Law and Anderson (2011) argue that professionals generally lack the skills needed. Similarly, research by others has found that many police officers are not equipped to support autistic individuals (Artingstall, 2007; Crane et al., 2016).

This small scale study was conducted with four UK police officers. Data from semi-structured interviews were analysed.

Why might an autistic person wander?

Some autistic people may not appreciate the concerns their caregivers might have when they wander off or the implications of being alone. Some may leave their caregivers to pursue an interest or because they love the sensation of running or the feeling of freedom that being alone gives. Conversely, they may run off or leave a situation as when they feel overwhelmed and seek escape (Rice *et al.,* 2016; Debbaudt, 2006). They may also have fears and phobias which lead them to move away from their carers (Law and Anderson, 2011; Love*,* Matson and West, 1990).

Donna Williams (2015), an autistic woman, said that as a child in supermarkets she would sometimes mistake others for her mother (eg follow adults who were wearing the same colour). Sometimes she became distressed in unfamiliar settings and so would leave her caregiver. Such anecdotes and other literature provides insight into possible reasons for wandering and it would clearly be useful for those who might support the person to have this knowledge and understanding. Leaving a supervised area can lead to danger (Anderson *et al.,* 2012; Rice et *al.,* 2016). These include running into traffic, drowning in water or being abducted (Hall, 2013; Bergstrom, Najdowski & Tarbox, 2014; Debbaudt, 2007). Entering private or restricted property or peering into windows can place individuals in further danger.

Support strategies towards independence

A key focus of independence training is to teach the dangers associated with wandering off and of talking to strangers (Bergstrom et al., 2014; Love et al., 1990; Anderson et al., 2012). Pan Skadden et al. (2009) and Hoch, Taylor and Rodriguez (2009) maintain it might be better to teach

individuals how to seek assistance from cashiers or security personnel when lost, rather than trying to prevent them from wandering off in the first place. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2004) suggest teaching the use of mobile phones to autistic individuals so that they can contact carers or relatives or emergency services, if needed, may be preferable. These require certain abilities and skills and some autistic people do not like having or using phones. The use of tracking devices may become more prevalent as these become easier to use and cheaper to buy, but there are ethical issues involved in tracking others. The National Autistic Society, Autism West Midlands and other organisations have developed a small plastic card (often called an Autism Alert card) which states that the holder has autism and may be a vulnerable person. It carries contact details of a family member or carer. This can be carried by the autistic adult or child and shown to others who are trying to help.

Implications of untrained police officers

An untrained police officer may view individuals who are running away or being non-compliant or challenging as suspicious (Chown, 2010). The UK's National Autistic Society's guide produced in 2011, entitled '*Autism guide for criminal justice professionals*' provides some advice on supporting those with autism in unfamiliar surroundings such as Court, but has no advice on how to respond to those who are lost or wandering.

General awareness and training of autism in the police force

Artingstall (2007) found that the training for police officers on autism and on disability, in general, was limited even for those who had been in the

job for a number of years, Her findings are not isolated and Iland (2014) recommends that professionals are given knowledge about developmental disabilities. The importance of training police early in their careers was also recommended by Gendle and Woodhams (2005) who found some negative reactions in police response towards those with disabilities. Kelly and Hassett-Walker (2016) found that emergency service first responders may have had training and awareness sessions about autism but this may not be sufficient for every situation. Given the diversity of the autistic population, it is difficult to cover all scenarios.

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE, 2005, as cited by Artingstall, 2007) was created to support and guide officers when questioning autistic individuals and this should be used in all stations in the UK. However, research conducted after PACE by Modell and Mak (2008) found officers were still in need of training. The Autism Act (2009) and the Equality Act (2010) both propose that frontline officers have an in-depth understanding of autism. Despite such Acts, a newly formed initiative has had to be introduced. The National Police Autism Association (NPAA, 2015) now has many objectives which build upon PACE. The initiative offers support for police officers who have a diagnosis of autism themselves. It also promotes positive practice to support those with autism, whether victims, witnesses or suspects. As part of this new initiative, there are appointed NPAA co-ordinators in all UK forces (NPAA, 2015). What is not known is whether these new coordinators are readily available and known to officers.

Research questions

Can UK police officers identify autism and understand the possible reasons for wandering?

Are police officers equipped with the skills and strategies to support lost or wandered autistic individuals?

The sample

Four police officers were asked to take part in the study, Their details are given in *Table 1.*

Table 1: Details of the police officers in the study

Officer 1	**Officer 2**	**Officer 3**	**Officer 4**
7 Years of Police Service	2 Years of Police Service	2.5 Years of Police Service	6 Years of Police Service
Experience of an autistic individual who had wandered			
Male autistic adult wandered away from a care home.	Male autistic adult wandered away from a care home.	A young autistic girl wandered away in town looking for her favourite shop that had relocated.	A young autistic boy found in a shopping mall who had wandered away from his carer and was very distraught.
Training or other source of knowledge about autism			
Short online training on learning disability/autism. Policing area close to special needs services.	No training on disability other than mental health. Her mother works with children.	No disability training. Has a brother with autism.	Short online training on learning disability.

Semi-structured interviews

To address these research questions a semi-structured interview was designed. These are flexible in nature and allow participants the freedom to elaborate on their responses and for the interviewer to clarify these, if necessary (Drever, 2006). The data collection was conducted in accordance with BERA (British Educational Research Association) guidelines (2011) and the University's ethical code of practice. The interviews were audio recorded.

The findings

Limited awareness of autism

The four police officers felt that there was limited awareness and knowledge of autism within the forces they had worked in. When asked to provide a description of autism and how this might present in a person found wandering, they were unsure. Although all four police officers had supported an individual with autism who had wandered away, they had difficulty defining the key areas affected in autism.

One officer said:

> *'I've never heard it called that* [Autism Spectrum Disorder] *but I'd say somebody that finds it difficult with social situations and that may impact the way they conduct themselves. I suppose you tell them one thing and they take it literally as read.' (**Officer 1)***

Another officer said:

> *' I suppose someone that doesn't fully understand what's kind of going on; someone could be really clever in one subject but not in*

something else...That is the big problem I don't actually know much." (***Officer 2)***

There was a difference in the level of knowledge for officers who had served a greater length of time. For example, Officer 1, who had been in the force for seven years, seemed to have a better understanding of the core features of autism (ie issues with social interaction and communication). In contrast, Officer 2, who had two years experience, saw autism as connected to savant skills. Officer 1 had followed a short, online training package, centred on learning disability with a section about approaching individuals with autism. Officer 2 had no disability training but had studied some mental health modules. Officer 2 also gained knowledge from other sources, particularly her mother who worked with children.

Officer 3 had an autistic brother and was one of the most aware participants in the study.

He said:

*'Well, my younger brother has autism actually. I mean I never really think about it, with the police. But actually looking at it, I guess subconsciously I do. I suppose I have a little understanding from home….. yeah I never looked at it like that.' (**Officer 3)***

It is evident here that personal experience affects the knowledge and understanding of autism. Learning on the job and supporting individuals with autism is likely to build a useful knowledge base. Online training may not be as effective. One participant said,

*“I remember two of the slides that were in that package were around autism… and that’s it , that’s the only sort of training… you can skip through it if you click the buttons” (**Officer 1)***

Using their own initiative

The study by Artingstall (2007) found that police officers were not aware of any specific strategies and skills for communicating with someone with autism. She explored police officers supporting individuals as victims and perpetrators of crime, with only some focus on missing individuals. Crane *et al.* (2016) found that some officers made attempts to make adjustments within police stations. Reasonable adjustments made by the participants in this study are described, as follows:

*‘That online package wouldn’t have given me the skills….it’s just my own experiences and kind of ‘winging it’…I probably would treat that person differently. Purely for the fact that I don’t really know much about autism. I’d probably take things slower and try and explain things slower.” (**Officer 1)***

*‘I’d kind of find out who they are first. Radio and find out where they’ve come from, any family members. Us coming along might freak them so trying to get in contact with family is important…I’d treat them like anyone else, like in the nicest way. See if they will speak to me. I don’t know, but if it’s a girl I don’t know if it’s best for a woman to go up to them.’ . (**Officer 2**)*

*‘I would remain calm. I would try and.. you know not distress them anymore. I think routines, routines might be changed so I would try and approach them calmly…Obviously, as I said I don’t know loads about it all, so I think it’s just being patient and trying to understand the situation’. (**Officer 3**)*

These comments show that these officers are unprepared and not equipped with the knowledge and skills needed. Their strategies are not autism specific and while remaining calm and being slower to approach are fine, the comment, *'kind of winging it'* is a concern.

There are limitations to police officers solely using their initiative and intuition. They are likely to be unprepared for times where an individual has a meltdown or shows other forms of distress. As Chown (2010) argues, these responses may be interpreted as problematic or the person may be thought to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. This is worrying as Officer 1 stated,

> *'We have the power of 136, Section 136 the Mental Health Act, that means anyone we deem who is in need of immediate care and control can be sectioned…. …they may end up in a mental health facility' (**Officer 1)***

So some autistic individuals may be wrongly assessed at the time and supported in an inappropriate way without appropriate autism knowledge.

While Officer 3 mentioned the importance of maintaining a sense of routine, this was based largely from his family experience of autism. Similarly, Officer 1 works in an area near special needs services and so may be more aware of individuals who often wander and will get to know them over time.

In response to research question two, *'Are police officers equipped with the skills and strategies to support lost or wandered autistic individuals'?*

it seems that the answer is ‘not effectively’. Although there is a willingness to try and empathise and to adjust their practice, this is by trial and error as they have no evidence base to draw on.

Inconsistency in training and partnerships

Only two of the four officers (Officers 1 and 4) in the study had had the opportunity to take an online training package which briefly explored autism. This is not a universal requirement for officers. Crane et al. (2016) argue that organisational and time constraints often affect whether an officer feels this type of training is important. and whether it is an important part of their ecological system. The comments of two of the officers showed they would welcome training on autism.

> *‘Yeah, it’s important to know how different people can be and the support needs to be right. I would like training on it, only last night there was a call in, concerning a man with Asperger’s syndrome who had wandered off.’ (***Officer 3***)*

> *‘I’m having to deal with a range of individuals within my job, so any training which, which hones in on a difference would be beneficial’. (***Officer 4***)*

However, despite this desire to learn about autism, there was little evidence this would happen even though there are more training resources available. In terms of external support systems, the four officers were asked whether they had heard of, and engaged with the National Police Autism Association Co-ordinator (NPAA). None of the four had any knowledge of this individual. The NPAA co-ordinator role was

not recognised by any of the officers despite the role being launched two years ago.

Officer 1 said:

> *'No! I didn't know what that was. I've never spoken to them, within both police forces I've worked in. I'd certainly like to know them, within my area I work there are a few special schools so we deal with these incidents quite regularly. It would be handy to know someone who is in that school system too and we can be taught how best to deal with these people.'*

Without this support, it is not surprising that the officers seemed uncertain when asked, *'Do you feel confidently equipped to support those with autism who have wandered away?'*

Concluding comments

The study found that these four police officers generally used their own intuition to support those who were found to be wandering. They had little knowledge or training on autism. It is possible in some cases that inappropriate responses were made which led to greater stress. All four officers said they would appreciate more autism training but were uncertain as to how to access this.

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